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Al Fan

Al Fan: The next step for charter schools -- quality, no excuses

By Al Fan

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Eighteen years after the founding of the nation's first charter school in St. Paul, Minnesota's charter school community is at a crossroads. Minnesota clearly has a number of high-quality charter schools but there is reason for concern. Recent reports, including one from the state's Office of the Legislative Auditor, show that Minnesota's charters as a whole lag behind traditional district schools in academic achievement.

One could try to explain away these statistics by noting that, as a whole, Minnesota's charter schools serve twice as many students who have traditionally underperformed in our public schools: children of color, children in poverty and children for whom English is a second language. All of this true. However, we believe that there can be no excuse for any school, charter or district, not to provide a high-quality education to all of its students, closing the achievement gap where it exists. Every child in Minnesota, and in America, deserves an equal opportunity to attain an education that allows him or her to succeed in life — no matter what income or ZIP code.

Beyond Minnesota, the charter school community has evolved from what was an initial focus on offering "choice and innovation" to one that now demands the creation and replication of successful schools. While never losing the connection to innovation, the commitment now is that quality is paramount and academic achievement is a reality for

every child.

In New York, Chicago and Washington D.C.'s poorest neighborhoods, in the streets of central Los Angeles, and along the country roads of rural Arkansas, high-performing charter schools are defying the notion that the challenges of poverty and historic patterns of lower student achievement cannot be overcome with high-quality instruction, quality teachers and great school leadership.

Organizations such as KIPP, Achievement First, Mastery, Aspire, IDEA Academy, Uncommon Schools, Green Dot Public School and a myriad of independent schools like Yes! College Prep in Houston or Promise Academy in New York City, whose standardized test scores testify to the ability of the poorest children to achieve at high levels, teach us important lessons about what works: high expectations, no excuses, whatever it takes, data-driven, quality leadership.

The evolution toward achievement, exemplified by these national models, is a critically important step in the growth of the charter school movement. While choice and innovation have been and will continue to be critical factors in the success of charter schools, this expanded focus on quality and achievement is long overdue.

President Barack Obama's commitment to the next generation of high-performing charters reflects his belief that charter schools are uniquely positioned to offer the kinds of educational opportunities that must be available to every child if public education is to remain the engine of equal opportunity in America. His plan to double funding for charters and to lift most caps and limitations on the growth of charter schools is an example of his commitment.

Despite the few bad apples that have allowed charter critics to say all charter schools are suspect,

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Minnesota already has dozens of successful, high-performing and uniquely innovative charter schools and has a solid foundation to build upon success.

In a few short years, Nova Classical Academy in St. Paul, Eagle Ridge Academy in Eden Prairie, and Stillwater's St. Croix Prep are among the state's highest-performing schools — public or private. The African-American student population at Minneapolis' Harvest Prep and Seed Academy is performing substantially higher on standardized tests than their counterparts in Minneapolis' traditional district schools. Avalon Charter School in St. Paul was recently highlighted by Business Week as one of the nation's top schools.

Quality arts schools, like St. Paul Conservatory for Performing Artists and Hopkins' Main Street School of Performing Arts, offer not only innovative performing arts programs, but also have strong academics programs. New charters like Global Academy, Hiawatha Leadership Academy and KIPP STAND are applying national best practices in an attempt to demonstrate ways to close Minnesota's large racial achievement gap.

Minnesota has nationally recognized charter support groups like Joe Nathan's Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota, which bring together and utilize "the best of" the collective experiences of the charter community.

This year, the Minnesota Legislature, with the assistance and support of key charter school leaders, passed a series of changes to the charter school law that will improve fiscal, management and oversight issues for all charter schools. While these accountability measures are important, they will not guarantee that student achievement will increase.

Charters, like all other schools, still face the challenge of providing a high-quality education and

operating a complex organization. The charter community must become stronger, share best practices, support each other to solve tough issues, and focus on achievement.

Minnesota is justly proud of being the pioneer of the nation's charter movement. We now have an opportunity to again be at the forefront of the next generation of charter schools by moving quickly to focus on quality, excellence and achievement. All students, no matter their background, deserve a high-quality education that honors their potential and allows them productive life options.

No excuses. Whatever it takes. Let's make it happen. And let's make it happen here.

Al Fan is executive director of Charter School Partners (charterschoolpartners.org), a newly formed nonprofit organization with national and state foundation support, whose mission is improving academic achievement in Minnesota's charter schools.